

ORPHEUS (ORPHÉE)

Origin: France

Released: 1950

Released in U.S.: 1950

Production: Émile Darbon for Productions André Paulvé/Les Films du Palais-Royal

Direction: Jean Cocteau

Screenplay: Jean Cocteau; based on his play

Cinematography: Nicolas Hayer

Editing: Jacqueline Sadoul

Narration: Jean Cocteau

Art direction: Jean Gabriel d'Eaubonne

Music: Georges Auric and Christoph Gluck

Running time: 112 minutes

Principal characters:

Orpheus	Jean Marais
Princess	Maria Casarès
Eurydice	Marie Déa
Heurtebise	François Périer
Cégeste	Édouard Dermit
Algaonice	Juliette Gréco
Inspector	Pierre Bertin
Friend in café	Henri Crémieux
Writer	Roger Blin
Presiding judge	Jacques Varennes

Jean Cocteau, who over a long and amazing career distinguished himself in a great many branches of the arts, avoided drawing distinctions between the varied media in which he worked. For him, it was all of a piece; he preferred the designation "poet" (in the ancient, expansive meaning of the term), which serves equally well in regard to his work on the more elaborate canvas of film. Self-taught in the course of his groundbreaking first feature *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930; *The Blood of a Poet*), he had come to the medium fresh and without any clear antecedents. It was the discipline of poetry that most informed his films, several of which drew heavily on mythology, classical as well as personal, imbuing them with his own philosophy of art and of life. His long identification with the character of Orpheus found expression in an informal trilogy, of which *Orpheus* is the centerpiece, flanked at opposite ends of Cocteau's directorial career by *The Blood of a Poet* and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959; *The Testament of Orpheus*).

In Cocteau's modern reworking of the story, Orpheus (Jean Marais) is a major poet and something of a national hero. Adored by the public, he is nevertheless scorned by the rising young poets who envy his success and his celebrity, and much disliked in avant-garde circles. While at the Café des Poètes, he crosses paths with the current darling of this set, the eighteen-year-old poet Jacques Cégeste (Édouard Dermit), in the company of his mysterious patroness, the Princess (Maria Casarès).

The drunken Cégeste gets into a fight with another patron, which turns into a general brawl. As the police try to drag Cégeste away, two leather-clad motorcyclists suddenly run him down, then speed away. Orpheus is enlisted by the Princess to serve as a witness. He helps her chauffeur, Heurtebise (François Périer), place Cégeste into her Rolls Royce, but they drive to the Princess' châlet instead of to the hospital. Along the way, Orpheus sees that Cégeste is dead.

The Princess dismisses all of Orpheus' questions. At the châlet, Cégeste is resurrected to become her servant. Orpheus is amazed to observe the group exiting through a mirror. Unable to follow them, he blacks out. When he regains consciousness, it is in an area of rolling sand dunes. Heurtebise is nearby with the Rolls Royce, both apparently placed at his disposal by the Princess. At home, Orpheus treats his wife Eurydice (Marie Déa) with indifference (she is pregnant, but does not tell him), and Heurtebise falls in love with her. On a trip to town to see the police inspector (Pierre Bertin), Orpheus catches sight of the Princess and attempts to follow her, but she disappears. Heedless of Heurtebise's warning, Orpheus becomes increasingly obsessed with the cryptic messages received only over the car's radio. It seems to speak with the voice of Cégeste. Each night, the Princess emerges from a mirror to watch Orpheus in his sleep.

Distressed by her husband's cold behavior, Eurydice also disregards a warning from Heurtebise and goes to seek the advice of Algaonice (Juliette Gréco), leader of the women's group "the Bacchantes." On the road, she is run down by the Princess' motorcyclists. Heurtebise brings the dying Eurydice back to her bedroom, but Orpheus, oblivious to outside events, remains in the car transcribing its messages. Emerging from the bedroom's trifold mirror with Cégeste, the Princess comes to claim Eurydice. Cégeste is seen to be the source of the mysterious radio messages, broadcast at the Princess' behest in order to lure Orpheus to her. Heurtebise accuses his superior of exceeding her authority so that she may have Orpheus to herself.

When he realizes what has happened, Orpheus agrees to accompany Heurtebise to the other side. He cannot say how much of his desire is to recover Eurydice and how much is to find the Princess again. They pass through the mirror, into a no-man's-land between life and death, known as the Zone. At the châlet, a tribunal sits in judgment of the Princess. Between its interrogations, Orpheus and the Princess confess their love for

each other. The Tribunal's verdict grants provisional freedom to the Princess, freedom for Orpheus, and a release of Eurydice, so long as Orpheus never looks at her again.

Despite their best efforts, this soon proves an impossible condition. Orpheus glimpses his wife in a mirror and she vanishes. Resigned to whatever fate has in store for him, Orpheus goes out to meet a mob led by the Bacchantes, which holds him responsible for the death of Cégeste. In the struggle for a gun, Orpheus is mortally wounded. As the police arrive, the body of Orpheus is taken away by Heurtebise, guarded by the motorcyclists.

Heurtebise guides Orpheus back through the Zone, though it is now a more difficult journey. Orpheus is now reunited with the Princess, who asks if he will obey her without question, and he agrees. In a great act of sacrifice, she orders Cégeste and Heurtebise to assist her in "killing" Orpheus, which has the effect of projecting Orpheus back through time to the world of the living. The poet can now fulfill his destiny. Orpheus and Eurydice are happily reunited—with no memory of what has transpired—even as, on the other side, the motorcyclists come to arrest the Princess and Heurtebise.

Orpheus is a film yielding far more material to a literary type of exegesis than to a cinematic one and has in fact inspired a number of scholarly books along these lines. Even in the attempt to limit analysis to purely cinematic terms, one is most often confronted with some form of poetry equivalent in the medium of film. It becomes essential to take note of some of the wide-ranging meanings Cocteau applied to the nature of the Poet and his work.

The Poet—who bends words, images, meter, and meaning to his will, in order to create art out of "thin air"—is more than a mortal human being; he is someone with special privileges and responsibilities, and, whether he realizes, access to magic. Yet the art is not really his: It comes from somewhere else, and he is only its vessel, its vehicle, its servant. Somehow in contact with this "other side," he is in effect an oracle, conveying truth contained within his art. Belonging fully to neither world, the Poet must walk the boundary between them, bridging the two. His poetry is a form of communication with the beyond; his destiny is to perform this service for mankind. The myth and the metaphor apply equally well to ordinary reality and transcendent experience, the conscious and the unconscious, art and life, or life and death.

Cocteau's special use of myth and fantasy was heavily bound up in what he termed "the marvelous"—a lending to persons or objects of an indefinable "unusualness," but one well grounded in realistic detail. The closer one approached to mystery and magic, he felt, the more careful a control was required, rather than any descent into abstraction or mysticism. Thus, in a major reworking of his 1926 play, more fanciful elements give way to familiar ones such as car radios, messages in code, mirrors, and rubber gloves.

Though supernatural, the added characters of Heurtebise (the subject of a noted Cocteau poem) and the Princess can readily be taken as "real." Heurtebise is, like Cégeste, only recently dead, and the Princess, too, can recall a once mortal form. They betray mixed allegiances and lingering traces of their past existence, in the form of recognizably human reactions.

Orpheus goes astray because he can no longer hear his muse—his own true creative voice—and so becomes susceptible to false signals and the designs of others. Before he can regain his own voice, he must successfully navigate different forms of death and rebirth: physical, spiritual, romantic, that of his wife, of his art, and his good name—above all, his attraction to death's embodiment in the form of the Princess. It is an odyssey more difficult than any mere physical journey. Transit of the Zone, only a part of this journey, is also a search within, after the wellsprings of inspiration. Even after Orpheus and Eurydice have won their initial reprieve from the Tribunal, Orpheus remains entranced by the (wrong) other side, unable to give up the Princess or the cryptic lines he regards as superior to any of his own. Through his encounters with these different forms of death, the artist gains—or regains—what he needs to function in life.

With *Orpheus*, Cocteau demonstrated that there need be no cinematic incompatibility between poetic presentation and an underlying realism. The film's poetic substance is implicit in its mythical content, story situations, thematic concerns, and the leading characters; it is also present in much of the dialogue (such as the great simile of bees in a glass hive, to describe a mirror's reflection of death at work, as the years pass over the course of a human life), though not to a showy or self-conscious degree. Realism is maintained by a reliance on familiar elements as agents of the story's fantastic events, and a literal, straightforward depiction of these events.

Several elements in the film owe their inspiration to World War II. The coded messages that set Orpheus onto his pursuit of the unknown were suggested to Cocteau by the British Broadcasting Corporation radio broadcasts to the French Resistance. For the locale of the Zone, he chose the bombed-out ruins of a military barracks at Saint Cyr. The deliberations of the Tribunal of the underworld could be those of an underground court, absolute and austere. Other elements, such as the Rolls Royce and the motorcycle-riding enforcers of the Princess, imparted a more contemporary character to the supernatural. Mirrors, Cocteau's favorite metaphor for the gateway to the beyond, figured prominently in his personal iconography.

The key to making the unreal real was an approach that might be called methodological invisibility—an elegant simplicity and directness that, with the partial exception of the few trick shots, avoided highly stylized or emphatic visuals. Scenes were allowed to play out in a naturalistic fashion, without extensive cutting. Unobtrusive camera angles were preferred, and a moving camera sparingly employed. When Cocteau deviated from this visual

plan, it was almost always well considered and with good reason: straight down from overhead angles to demarcate the magical strangeness of Orpheus' crossing through the mirror (the same angle, however, used when Eurydice first meets Heurtebise seems somewhat out of place); high, over-the-shoulder angles on the Tribunal judges, and on the Princess and Heurtebise willing Orpheus back to his own world at the conclusion, which add weight and authority; very moody lighting, as Heurtebise confronts the Princess over the dying Eurydice, entering from right of frame, when Orpheus is warned not to look at her. More typical of the film is the understated economy of the shot in which Eurydice's bicycle is seen continuing into a ditch, riderless, with the roar of motorcycles heard on the sound track.

Yet through the same elegant restraint, Cocteau was able to give his more striking and memorable images a true poetic quality, without calling undue attention to them. Shots such as the Princess' aides carrying the prostrate body of Cégeste up the stairs of her stark chalet or the beautifully handled love scene between Orpheus and the Princess—first shown in head and shoulder close-ups, done vertically and from above, but from an opposite, bottom of frame to top orientation—clearly demonstrate this. Even the more radical images—characters still against moving backgrounds while traversing the Zone; Orpheus and Heurtebise hurled along its walls like windblown spiders, conveyed with crazily tilting camera angles—seem appropriate, rather than jarring.

There are also Cocteau's trick shots, justly famous in the annals of cinema, whose great simplicity and effectiveness have seldom if ever been matched. His signature use of reverse motion lent grace to the newly resurrected characters and magic to inanimate objects such as mirror shards reforming themselves into a mirror once more. A silvery vat of mercury allowed Orpheus' gloved hands seemingly to penetrate the mirror-glass. An especially clever trick allowed the mirror in the Tribunal's room—from which Orpheus and Heurtebise emerge—to retain its "reflectivity" before, during, and after the transition: The "mirror" was a hole in the wall looking into a duplicate set, with the judges (whom the viewer had just seen in shots within the foreground set) now sitting in the background set, simulating their own reflections; poet and chauffeur come bounding through, and the presence of the real Maria Casarès, on the viewer's side of the mirror in the right foreground, seals the illusion.

Orpheus benefits greatly from near perfect casting and mostly excellent work from the lead actors. If Jean Marais briefly slips into the stance of the self-aware matinee idol, Casarès is as imposing, mysterious, and dangerously alluring a personification of death as one could ask for. François Périer and Marie Déa provide exactly the right notes of sympathetic understanding to their characters, and Édouard Dermit adds the lightest touch of

humor. The score of Cocteau's frequent collaborator Georges Auric, present in but a few scenes, manages to combine sprightliness with an aura of majestic dignity.

Though *Orpheus* is not a film that wears very well through several proximate viewings, it is a major work which one might wish to see every few years. Cocteau sought to achieve a poetic communication with the beyond such as Orpheus pursued—with the beyond in no way limited to the hereafter—and to impart this to his audience. The synergy of elements he brought to bear for this purpose worked on a level most uncommon in film—that of poetry. In response to Heurtebise's assertion that it is not necessary to understand, but only to believe, viewers will acknowledge that Cocteau indeed made them believe.

Jordan Fox